

# Still the Noblest Calling

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By JD Wetterling

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I visited with three old friends recently at a park in my town. It seems like only yesterday that we were all together, but actually it had been 28 years. There was a crowd at the park that day, and it took us awhile to connect, but with the aid of a computer we made it. I found Lance at Panel 54W, line 037, Lynn over at Panel 51W, line 032, and Vince down at line 103 on Panel 27W. We were gung-ho young fighter pilots in Vietnam, the cream of the crop of the US Air Force pilot training system, and now their names are on that 250-foot-long, half-size model of the Vietnam Memorial that moves around the country. I had intentionally avoided visiting the wall when it came to town in years past, because I did not trust myself to behave in a composed manner, but after nearly three decades it was time to try for some closure on this issue. I told my wife that I preferred to go alone, if that was all right, and, truth be known, I nearly backed out at that.

Standing in front of that somber wall, I tried to keep it light, reminiscing about how things were back then. We used to joke about the psychiatric term for a passionate love affair with inanimate flying objects--we flew F-100's--and we marveled at the thought that the taxpayers actually paid us to do this "work." We were not draftees, but college graduates there by choice, opting for the cramped confines of a jet fighter cockpit over the comfort of corporate America. In all my life I've not been so passionate about any other work. If that sounds like an exaggeration, then you've never danced the wild blue with a supersonic angel.

I vividly remember the Sunday afternoon, in the summer of '68, when we flew out of Travis Air Force Base, California, on a troop transport headed for Vietnam. Lynn, Lance and I crowded around the same porthole and watched the Golden Gate Bridge disappear below broken clouds. We had gone through fighter pilot school

together and had done some serious bonding. In an exceedingly rare moment of youthful fighter pilot humility, I wondered if I would live to see that bridge again. For reasons I still don't understand, I was the only one of the three who did.

Once in Vietnam, we passed the long, lonely off-duty hours at Dusty's Pub, a lounge that we lieutenants built on the beach of the South China Sea at Tuy Hoa Air Base. The rook at Dusty's doubled as a sun deck and the walls were non-existent. The complaint heard most often around the bar, in the standard gallows humor of a combat squadron, was that it was "...a lousy war, but it's the only one we have." (I've cleaned up the language a bit.) We sang mostly raunchy songs that never seemed to end--someone was always writing new verses--and, as an antidote to loneliness, fear in the night, and the sadness over dead friends, we often drank too much.

Vince joined us at Dusty's Pub halfway through my tour of duty, and since he was a like-minded country kid from Montana, we hit it off. He had a wide grin, slightly stooped shoulders, and his own way of walking--he just threw his feet out and stepped on them. But what he lacked in military bearing he made up for with the heart of a tiger. He often flew as my wingman, and we volunteered for the night missions on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. One starless night, the longest, saddest night of my life, we got into a really nasty gun duel with some anti-aircraft artillery batteries. I watched Vince die in a mushroom shaped fireball that for a moment turned night into day.

Lance--a New York boy who took unmerciful grief from the rest of us because he talked like a New Yorker--crashed into the side of a mountain in the central highlands while attacking a target. Lynn, a happy-go-lucky jock from Pennsylvania's Slippery Rock College with a hound named John the Basset, returned to his base on a stormy night in July after weather aborted his mission. Two miles of wet runway weren't enough to stop an F-100 landing at 160 knots with all its bombs still on board. He ran off the end, flipped over, and slid through the minefield at the perimeter fence, setting off a gruesome sound and light show.

At the wall, I told the guys only about the good parts of the last 28 years. Lacy, one of our associates from Dusty's Pub, became an astronaut, and a few summers ago I watched from my back yard,

near Tampa, as he blasted off. His voice over the radio from space was at least an octave lower than it was the day I heard him radio for help while swinging from his parachute hung up in a tree in Laos. Another Dusty's patron, Rick, is now a two-star general, and I reminded them of what we used to say about the military promotion system--it's like a septic tank, only the really big chunks floated to the top.

I didn't tell them about how ostracized Vietnam vets are, that during that same week, one of the nation's leading newspapers has run an article that implied we Vietnam vets were, to quote one syndicated columnist, "either suckers or psychos, victims or monsters." I didn't tell them that the secretary of defense they fought for back then has now declared that he was not a believer in the cause for which he assigned them all to their destiny. I didn't tell them that a draft age kid from Arkansas, who hid out in England to dodge his duty while they were fighting and dying, is now the commander-in-chief. And I did not tell them we lost that lousy war. I gave them the same story I've used since the Nixon administration: We were winning when I left."

I relived that final day as I stared at the black onyx wall. The dawn came up like thunder after a year and 268 combat missions in the valley of the shadow. The ground trembled as 33 F-100's roared off the runway, across the beach, and out over the South China Sea, climbing into the rising sun. On the eastern horizon a line of towering deep purple clouds stood shoulder-to-shoulder before a brilliant orange sky that slowly turned powder blue from the top down. From somewhere on that stage, above the whine of spinning turbine blades, I could hear a choir singing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" in *fortissimo*: The "...Lord God Omnipotent reigneth...", and He was bringing me home, while Lance and Lynn and Vince will remain as part of the dust of Southeast Asia until the end of time.

I was not the only one talking to the wall through tears. A leather-vested, bare-chested biker two panels to my left was in even worse shape. I backed about twenty-five yards away from the wall and sat down on the grass under a clear blue sky and mid-day sun that perfectly matched the tropical weather of the war zone. The wall, with all 58,200 names, consumed my field of vision. I tried to wrap

my mind around the mega-tonnage of violence, carnage and ruined lives that it represented. Then I thought of how Vietnam was only one small war in the history of the human race, and I was overwhelmed with a sense of mankind's wickedness.

My heart felt like wax in the blazing sun, and I was on the verge of becoming a spectacle in the park. I arose and walked back up to the wall to say good-bye and ran my fingers over the engraved names--Lance and Lynn and Vince--as if I could communicate with them in some kind of spiritual Braille. I wanted them to know that God, duty, honor, and country will always remain the noblest calling. Revisionist history by the elite dodgers who are trying to justify their actions cannot change that.

I have been a productive member of society since the day I left Vietnam. I am proud of what I did there, and I am especially proud of my friends--heroes who voluntarily, enthusiastically gave their all. They demonstrated no greater love to a nation whose highbrow opinion makers are still trying to disavow them. May their names, indelibly engraved on that memorial wall, likewise be found in the Book of Life.